

Wales – Heritage, History & Handicrafts

May 13- 23, 2011. It's finally here! Those dates have beckoned to me from the pages of my calendar all winter long, adding a little ray of hope to the cheerless days. I've left my home in St. John's, Newfoundland, and my dear little cat Frankie in the able hands of my friend Katrin to start on this adventure. Now I'm in Toronto, meeting up with Joyce and some of the gang to travel to Heathrow together. What fun! After an enthusiastic rendezvous at Pearson and the usual restless night over the Atlantic dawn comes pretty darn early to our group. We stumble from the plane and shoot off immediately on the fastest moving sidewalk I've ever clung to. We're in the big city now, I think. No time for ambling along, lost in obscure Celtic thoughts.

I am so looking forward to this trip. Wales is on my bucket list. I've loved the Celtic world for as long as I can remember and I travel there whenever possible. In fact, I feel so at home in some of these places that I suspect I've lived one or several past lives there. Wales is little known to me, however. It doesn't seem to get the tourist attention that Scotland and Ireland attract, so this trip will be an eye-opener. One thing is certain. The Welsh love sheep and they respect real wool. Plus I'm travelling with knitters. It just doesn't get much better than that.

Now comes a hitch, however. We meet up with the rest of our group of 14 at a designated point in Terminal 3 only to discover that some have failed to make the rendezvous. Patti has checked in though, so we're not worried about her. She is delayed because, believe it or not, a crack formed in the windscreen of the cockpit of her plane. How did the airline, which shall remain nameless, deal with this problem? After a schedule-ruining delay they simply asked the pilot and co-pilot to change seats! I am not making this up. The two Judys however, travelling from Denver together, are well and truly MIA. They might be orbiting the rings of Saturn, for all Joyce can discover. We are distressed to leave without them but so many arrangements are at stake that we cannot linger at Heathrow and must trust the travel gods to take care of them. Which they do.

One of the first highlights of the trip is meeting our coach driver Terrance Jones. He's a genial giant of a man who seems to love driving and guides us smoothly out of the chaos of the terminal onto the chaos of the motorway. We are on our way. We soon find out that not only is Terrance a *bona fide* Welsh speaking Welshman, he is even a Welsh Guard. A triple whammy of Welshness. A month or so ago this would have little meaning for most of us but we are all still basking in the glow of the Royal Wedding and can picture our man standing to attention in his lovely red and gold uniform, red tights (!) and lacy ruff. Yummy! We are even more thrilled to discover that he was on duty at Westminster Abbey during the ceremony, and that he knew the two princes as young boys. We'd let Terrance drive us anywhere. Anywhere at all. He explains that the name he has chosen for his coach company is actually the Welsh word for butter. It's a sentimental choice because his grandfather, a whiz with an axe, could cut through wood "like a knife through butter". And so we christen our chariot the Butter Bus. We grow fond of it and its tricky little ways during the days that follow.

We scorch along the motorway, the first hint of culture shock coming when we stop for lunch at a rest stop. Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Starbucks and Burger King! This familiar stuff makes the jet lag a bit easier to deal with, mind you. I notice that one can also buy a bunch of the most

beautiful little budding roses for just a fiver at these stopping places, a take out rotisserie chicken, or even a book from W.H. Smith. That's pretty civilized.

It's really not long before we pull up to the Cardiff Hilton. BUT – an anxious official asks us to make ourselves and our unassuming Butter Bus scarce because the Duke of Gloucester is expected to arrive momentarily. Whaaaat? And 'oo's 'e when 'e's at 'ome, we wonder?? Should we play the Canadian Knitter card, LOL? We cool our heels on a side street, trying to figure out just who this pushy duke is. Although several members of our party show themselves to be remarkably well informed about the Royal Family a Blackberry saves the day. When we discover that the D of G is a mere cousin to the Queen we get a little pushy ourselves. Terrance calls the desk and we are allowed to park.

In the evening we have a Welcome to Wales reception in the sunny hotel. And who joins us? Patti and The Two Judys, who met up in a truly providential fashion and journeyed to Cardiff together. The travel gods have done their bit and we are together again, ready for adventure.

At the reception our drinks are poured with a generous touch by Alex and Emyr Griffith of the travel consulting firm Welsh Rarebits Ltd. Their guiding hand has left its mark on our itinerary, and most particularly on the fascinating hotels chosen for us. They are amazed by this multinational group of wool loving friends who are also knowledgeable and experienced travellers. They wonder too about the rutted, out of the way tracks to isolated sheep farms that we propose to visit. Terrance will take care of all of that, thank goodness. But most of all they wonder about our intense interest in a certain unit in an obscure industrial park in Llanfair Caereinion. "There's absolutely nothing there," says Emyr. "Trust me," says Joyce, "There is. It's called Colinette Yarns."

Saturday, May 14

Oh boy! My first Welsh breakfast, and it doesn't disappoint. First porridge or meusli, toast, coffee, yogurt, fruit, and juice. And then comes the cooked breakfast. I fancy myself to be a connoisseur of British sausages and I don't intend to skip this pleasure at any time during my trip.

Back aboard the Butter Bus we make our way to St. Fagan's open air museum. This is a huge property, made up of old buildings from all parts of Wales which were reconstructed on this site, so we get to experience the Wales of every historic period, from early settlement to Elizabethan manor house to cosy farm cottage. It's a lovely day and a good chance for a walk outdoors, so I set off for the Iron Age settlement. Here I get to add another black house to my life list. I've visited them in Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, and Cape Breton. Was I born in one once?? I am so engrossed that I lose track of the group almost immediately and wonder whether the mother ship has taken everyone back to Cardiff without me. I decide to have an ice cream to consider this and then feel reassured when I find Joyce in a basketry workshop. She is in her element – basketry is a passion of hers.

Returning from St. Fagan's some intrepid knitters stop off at Cardiff Bay to shop but I head back to the hotel where I fall dead asleep. I wake up in time for a quick run through Marks & Sparks, Boots, and a few other fav stores before closing time. The hotel bar has Guinness on tap so I am a happy camper. The talk is all about Eric Clapton's gig there that very evening. Nobody mentions the Duke of Gloucester.

Sunday, May 15

Up early, eat a big breakfast and climb on the coach to head to some new and exotic destination. This will be the pattern of our days on this trip.

Today we head first to Aberglasney Garden. It takes longer to get there than it looks on the map – this is common in Wales. Terrance makes all the entrance arrangements at the kiosk in Welsh, which fascinates us. A lovely lady tells us the amusing history of the place in the most musical, lilting English I've ever heard. To summarize, it goes something like this. Owain Glendwyr was there. Also many people died there over the years, surrounded by gin bottles. Hippies nearly ruined everything until loving gardeners saved the day. A happy ending. It's a lovely spot, with a good gift shop, but not much is in bloom because the season is early, so we must imagine it in the full glory of summer.

We head off through endless soft green hills to Ystrad, Juliet Morgan's rare breeds sheep farm. This takes some pretty fancy driving on very narrow roads and I'm glad I'm not at the wheel. Sitting at the front of the bus is scary enough. Juliet is a young, energetic farmer, passionately devoted to her flock. At every stage of production, from farming to spinning, her yarn is certified organic according to international Global Organic Textile Standards. Europeans are so advanced in this respect. She seems thrilled that we know Wensleydale means more than just a type of cheese or a place in Yorkshire. We've all knit with that lovely wool for years. She loves her sheep dearly, which reminds me of how much I miss Frankie, my cat. We buy as much fleece and wool as we can fill our hands with and leave a nice little pile of cash with Juliet to show our appreciation of her work and life.

Back over hill and dale to Lampeter, home of The Welsh Quilt Centre. Something is amiss with the schedule though so we head to the pub where they manage to do a pretty good job of feeding us all on short notice. I order my fav English pub dish – a jacket potato. Cheap, unassuming, and always utterly delicious. When the schedule gets sorted out we join Jen Jones at the quilt centre. She is a patrician American woman now leading my fantasy life in Wales. She has rescued Welsh quilting from obscure decline and turned it into art. After admiring the exhibit in her gallery we drive a short distance to her shop, where I have never before seen so many antique quilts for sale. This is temptation indeed and I manage to find the perfect thing. It's a quilted pillow dating from about 1930 and I know it will match my décor perfectly. Fits in my suitcase too.

Ah, The Falcondale! Our country hotel near Lampeter. The beautiful rooms, the cheerful bar, the manicured gardens, the reading room with a dog's dish of water thoughtfully provided – and the memorable dinners with the most excellent potatoes I've ever eaten. It seems Wales is known for these. Sometimes there are several kinds to choose from and we carbohydrate starved

North Americans dig in, evening after evening. Wish I was there right now, my friends. Don't you?

Monday, May 16

Lots and lots of driving today. We take the scenic route to Fishguard, a lovely little place and home to The Last Invasion Tapestry. We hear the story of the remarkable way in which it was made. Then we're off to Melin Trygwynt. It's our first woollen mill and we've been panting to get there. Since we've already stopped at a great many gift shops Terrance can't figure out what the fuss is all about, but several knitters have done their research and know that this mill is noted for its woven goods. We take a lot of stuff off their hands and are happier for it.

Then on to St. David's, a perfect vest-pocket cathedral city. The smallest city in the UK, in fact. I've read that it's an ancient holy place, well known to the druids before St. David put his mark on the place. In *The Matter of Wales* Jan Morris calls it the "spiritual hub of the whole Celtic world". "Here," she writes, "the Celtic missionaries came and went, on their journeys through the western seas and here the itinerant Irish preachers landed on their way to evangelize a pagan Europe. Everywhere are the remains of shrines and chapels ..."

Today St. David's is a picturesque little town. The cathedral itself seems to be quite intimate and not at all like a huge Gothic abbey. It's tucked into a recess in a hill and, wonder of wonders, there's a working dairy farm on the slope above where cows chew contentedly amidst the sanctity. This has come to represent Wales to me – splendour hidden behind a façade of understatement.

I have lunch at The Refectory inside the cathedral. It's cafeteria-style and a little awkward but I'm continually amazed at the quality of food in these small places. Nothing is pre-packaged or frozen. All fresh and delicious. My great coup comes after lunch. I pop into a tiny bookshop where, for the price of just one itty bitty quid, I find a copy of *I Bought A Mountain*, by Thomas Firbank. Published in 1940 it's billed as "the dramatic best-selling story of a mountain farm in North Wales." I was introduced to this book years ago by a knitting friend and read it at my public library where it was classed as a rare book that could not be borrowed. The shop owner acknowledges that I've hit the jackpot. "You've got a real treasure there," he says, regretfully parting with it.

Leaving the town of Dewi Sant, St. David's name in Welsh, we make our way to Bettina Becker's organic wool farm, down a very narrow and winding track in Llandissilio. It's here that I experience a flashback to about 1965 when a good many of my friends lived on various hippy farms in Atlantic Canada. Bettina and her partner are raising a flock of Shetland sheep and living out that dream. Their parents must be worried sick! We leave money behind, in exchange for woollen treasure.

We're a pretty tired group when the Butter Bus finally pulls into The Falcondale, but we clean up great and after a beer or two we have another memorable dinner. That night I tune into Welsh TV for the first time – and think I must somehow have moved to Poland. Or Portugal. Spoken Welsh is unlike anything familiar to me. As for the written language, who can even make a start

on it? As Kathy points out, if a person picks up a pamphlet Welsh-side up, the spelling is such a shock that they assume they must have had a stroke.

Tuesday, May 17

A very successful day on the road. Our first visit is to the National Wool Museum, Drefach Felindre, near Newcastle Emlyn. What an advanced nation this is to have a museum dedicated to wool! We are given a detailed tour of the workings of an old flannel mill. Our guide also explains the significance of the Welsh nursing shawl in the indigenous culture and the important role it plays in the general folk memory. It's another symbol of Welshness and we are privileged to encounter it in its native land. There's an excellent shop and tearoom too. By now Terrance is shaking his head at our ability to shop and he's probably utterly happy that his wife doesn't go on Joyce's tours. Every morning he announces how many new bags have been added to the pile he has to squeeze into the Butter Bus.

Onward to Blueberry Angoras, with its flock of fluffy, curious angora goats frolicking in a field of juicy emerald grass. We want to own them all and take them home to bed with us at night. Who would not? It's a beautiful farmstead and the perfect shop is piled high with luscious mohair in every conceivable shade. We buy as much as we can carry -- and get through customs. Several of us feel that our fantasy lives are being lived here, by others, at Blueberry Angoras. I am personally considering doing an eat, pray, love here if I ever get the chance.

On the way home Terrance detours us to Newport Sands beach, one of the famous Pembrokeshire beaches. Miles of breathtaking golden sand and the tide so far out. We have a chance to take a stroll in the fresh air to commune with our muses before heading home for the evening.

Wednesday, May 18

As Meg says, it's onward and somewhere today. We are on our way to Conwy in North Wales. According to Terrance this will be "the real Wales". Nothing we've seen so far has qualified, in his opinion. (Guess we can't ask Joyce for a refund!) I'm learning that being from South or North Wales is a critical part of one's identity. We leave the manicured fields of Carmarthenshire in the morning and drive first to Aberaeron, a little town typical of seaside Wales, where we have a look around. Then it's along the coast to Aberystwyth. It's a big, handsome university town, which gives it an air of prosperous familiarity. My favourite though is Dolgellau -- don't even try to pronounce it. You will not succeed. First a mad rush to find the washrooms which are located some distance from where the bus stops. After that we are free to enjoy the place, and Marilyn comes up trumps by locating a yarn shop. Here I find my second great coup of the trip. It's a skein of Noro Silk Garden sock yarn in what seem to be the exact shades of the landscape we are driving through. Even though this yarn was manufactured in Japan it keeps me knitting happily for the rest of the trip, looking up from time to time to compare the reality with the colourway.

We hurtle on to Porthmadog where The Cob Challenge is in full swing. Organizers challenged knitters to supply handknit strips that were joined to make a scarf more than 1.5 km long. This

scarf was then strung along the Cob, a causeway, to commemorate its construction two centuries before. What a triumph! Local knitters know of our visit and greet us warmly. We are among Our People. After a good lunch we board the steam train for a nice little journey into dramatic Snowdonia. Before visiting Wales I held the misinformed belief that the entire country looked like this rugged region with its bare crags and scree slopes. Alas, I am forced to conclude that steam trains are a guy thing. Men pop out of nowhere along the route to photograph the train passing though. I'm convinced they would scarcely notice naked women hanging from the windows of the Welsh Highland Railway, even with open bottles of beer in their hands.

Conwy proves to be a beautiful little town and The Castle, our hotel, is a centrally located treasure. My friend Chris joins us for two nights there. When her father passed away she returned to Wales to live after 40 years in Canada. She tells us of the privileges senior citizens enjoy here, especially for free public transportation. She also tells us what it was like growing up in Wales in the 1960s when Conwy was Conway and everything was given over to English. Being Welsh was akin to being subversive in those days.

Thursday, May 19

Chris and I have arranged to spend this day and evening together, so I miss the rehearsal of the male choir that was unexpectedly re-scheduled. I'll leave it up to Joyce to describe that peak experience. Chris and I wander around town, eating and drinking when we feel like it and taking a closer look at Conwy Castle. It too is built, in my opinion, on an intimate scale rather than as a massive fortress. In the evening we visit all three pubs in town, ending up at quiz night at The Liverpool Arms. We are somehow invited to join a team of young guys, and that team somehow chooses the name Sluts on Fire, so we have a hilarious evening. Every time the quiz master asks a puzzling question, for example, a guy in our group demands that it be repeated in North Walian. In spite of my exceptional ignorance of British sport but possibly because I can still remember life in the 1960s, we manage to come in second.

From Joyce: We left after dinner for a short excursion in the beautiful Welsh countryside to attend a weekly rehearsal of the Male Voice Choir in the tiny village of Betws-yn-Rhos. The conductor had a wonderful voice and was a discerning leader, and the group of thirty plus singers were largely farmers from the area. Most of the songs were in Welsh, but when they sang a medley from the American South, our Southern Belle from Virginia was reduced to tears.

At the close of the concert, we joined a small group of the singers at the local pub, the Wheatsheaf Inn for a refreshing lager and more impromptu singing. A great end to the evening. During the short drive back to the hotel, I was amazed at how dark the countryside was, without the light pollution we are used to at home.

Friday, May 20

This is the day we drive to Anglesey and I am most anxious to cross Menai Strait, because of its historical importance. Anglesey, or Ynys Mon, was where the Celts in Britain made their last stand against the conquering Romans. They'd been squeezed into this little corner of Wales and

prepared to fight to the death. Jan Morris calls it “a Celtic Berchtesgaden”. When the Romans arrived they looked apprehensively over the water to the island beyond where they saw the Druids, their captains and their followers lined up on the opposite bank. “At this sight,” says Tacitus, “our soldiers were gripped by fear.” The warriors were ranged along the water’s edge “like a forest of weapons”, the Druids stood with their heads raised to the sky, howling curses, and all around ran shrieking women, “like furies”, all in black, with hair wildly dishevelled and lighted torches in their hands.

But, as Jan Morris says, the Romans weren’t the masters of Europe for nothing, and in the end they slaughtered or captured every Celt. And that was that.

Our crossing of Menai Strait is a much more peaceful affair involving a big, sturdy bridge. And on the opposite side is tidy Beaumaris with its sea views and ice cream coloured houses. And its shopping too, of course. Lots of time for a cup of tea and a relaxed walk around this inviting town.

Heading home I realize how tired we all are. Everybody has a knee or a hip or a back that is giving them trouble. “I was young when I first got on this bus,” I think to myself. I’m looking pretty ragged too, now that my beauty routine is down to about 15 seconds every morning. I haven’t quite got the hang of British plumbing with its combination of knobs, chains, switches and buttons, used alone or in combination. We’ve all eaten a lot too and curious dieting strategies have begun to emerge. No dessert at breakfast, for example. Just a bag of crisps for lunch, perhaps. Only one type of potato at dinner instead of three. That sort of thing.

Saturday, May 21

Expectations are running very high indeed today. We leave Conwy and are off to Colinette Yarns. Joyce has said that, “on past tours members have emerged with armloads of the distinctive yarns, purchased at bargain prices.” Who could ask for more? Even Terrance is curious.

We don’t make a beeline though. We wend our way leisurely through the beautiful countryside, even slipping into England for a minute or two on the motorway, to our horror. We’ll be back there soon enough. Let’s stay in Wales as long as possible. We stop in Llangollen for a quick lunch, and Kym and I find and devour a pasty in record time, following it up with shortbread from an impressive bakeshop.

Tension mounts as we pull into the unprepossessing parking lot of the industrial estate in Llanfair Caereinion. Terrance is maddeningly slow to park and open the door. We de-coach and then we are inside a magical temple of yarn. I have seen some pretty impressive retail establishments on my travels but this one is right up there. I perceive that the genius and artistry of Colinette and her team extends into life. It’s not confined to yarn design. Her son Sam gives us a warm welcome and devotes himself to serving us attentively during our visit. Tea and baked goods have also been prepared for us. Overcome by curiosity, Terrance takes a bemused swing through and stays for a cuppa.

The next hour passes as if we are in a dream. A very brightly coloured dream in which we move through rooms of yarn, all of which is surprisingly affordable. This shocking fact brings out the hoarder in me and I restrain myself, trying to find only what I will really use in future. It's impossible though. Everything is beautiful and alluring and I begin to imagine I am quite a different knitter from my true self. What the heck.

We return exhausted to the coach and slump in our seats, spent. We are on our way to Welshpool and our wagons are pointed toward home. At this stage Terrance becomes curious about just how much money we've left behind in the shops. Patti agrees to show him one of her sales receipts, in total confidence. Terrance looks – and takes it like a millionaire, without flinching.

Sunday, May 22

Our last full day in Wales, and we spend it on a leisurely tour of Powys Castle and its gardens. What a place! Forests of rhodos are blooming, the yew trees are clipped to look like giant containers of florists' foam, and the sun is beating down on it all. I walk and walk, knitting on a low bench looking up to the castle and knitting on a high bench looking down into the garden. Another great coffee and National Trust gift shop too. We tour the castle itself and feel like we're in the midst of a Masterpiece Theater production.

We're home in plenty of time to get ready for our final reception and dinner. Last chance for roast potatoes. Can I manage to have cream in all three courses, I wonder? Joyce has arranged for author Idris Evans to speak to us at dinner. He's the picture of a Welsh man of letters, as I understand the concept. Dylan Thomas, with a touch of Tennessee Williams. He tells us the story of the cattle drovers and their tremendous contribution to Welsh history and life. Or "how the Welsh invented the modern world," Velma quips, with considerable perception. Idris is so entertaining that he could speak about wallpaper and we'd love it. A final toast to Wales and knitting, and so to bed.

Monday, May 23

Of the long road home perhaps the less said the better. Leaving peaceful Wales early in the Butter Bus, moving along ever busier motorways. The shock of Heathrow. Flight delays for multiple reasons, including the Icelandic volcano. Missing my connection to Newfoundland but being put up in a hotel for four hours sleep before boarding a dawn flight for home. Uneventful arrival at the house, my cat and I happy to be reunited. After settling in the first thing I do is buy a bag of potatoes.

Shirl the Purl